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JAZZ LIVES

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JAZZ WORTH READING: "THE BOSTON JAZZ CHRONICLES: FACES, PLACES AND NIGHTLIFE 1937-1962"

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Some of my readers will already know about Richard Vacca's superb book, published in 2012 by Troy Street Publishing. I first encountered his work in Tom Hustad's splendid book on Ruby Braff, **BORN TO PLAY**. Vacca's book is even better than I could have expected.

Much of the literature about jazz, although not all, retells known stories, often with an ideological slant or a "new" interpretation. Thus it's often difficult to find a book that presents new information in a balanced way. **BOSTON JAZZ CHRONICLES** is a model of what can be done. And you don't have to be particularly interested in Boston, or, for that matter, jazz, to admire its many virtues.

Vacca writes that the book grew out of his early idea of a walking tour of Boston jazz spots, but as he found out that this landscape had been obliterated (as has happened in New York City), he decided to write a history of the scene, choosing starting and ending points that made the book manageable. The book has much to offer several different audiences: a jazz-lover who wants to know the Boston history / anecdotal biography / reportage / topography of those years; someone with local pride in the recent past of his home city; someone who wishes to trace the paths of his favorite — and some obscure — jazz heroes and heroines. (Vacca's book could become the **ULYSSES** of jazz Boston, although we'd have to settle on a day to follow the paths of, perhaps Sabby Lewis or Frankie Newton through this vanished terrain.)

I found the proliferation of new information delightful, even though I was familiar with some of Boston's "hot spots of rhythm" and the musicians who played there: Newton, Max Kaminsky, Dick Twardzik, Serge Chaloff, Bobby Hackett, George Wein, Jaki Byard, Toshiko Akiyoshi, Vic Dickenson, Ruby Braff, Alan Dawson, Jaki Byard, Herb Pomeroy, Nat Pierce, Charlie Mariano, John Field, Buzzy Drootin, Joe Gordon, and others. I'd known about the Hi-Hat, the Savoy, Mahogany Hall, and the various permutations of Storyville. But on every page I read stories that were both new and illuminating (filling in gaps in the lives of musicians I had known as well as obscure ones) and learned a great deal about place and places.

And Vacca has an old-fashioned respectfulness, which is rare in this century. True, there are stories of low life and bad behavior, for some of those night spots were run by and populated by people who gave way to their impulses — but Vacca is no tabloid journalist, savoring wicked or illicit behavior. And his amused, gentle forgiveness makes the book especially charming.

Topography — whether substantial or vanished — has a good deal to do with experience. When I could visit Your Father's Mustache in New York and realize that its floor space was that of Nick's circa 1944, it made something click: memory met tangible reality. Knowing more about the Savoy — as a place, run by real figures in a genuine historical panorama — adds to my experience of listening to broadcasts taken from there.

The photographs — almost all of them new to me — and the maps (a delight) add to the pleasure of this book. As well, I learned about musicians I'd never heard of, or from, who played major roles in Boston's jazz life: Dean Earl, Al Vega, Mabel Robinson Simms, as well as places I'd heard little of — Izzy Ort's Bar and Grille, for one. James Reese Europe puts in an appearance, as does Sam Rivers; George Frazier, Nat Hentoff, Father Norman J. O'Connor, Symphony Hall, Symphony Sid, Teddi King, Jake Hanna, Leroy Parkins, Fat Man Robinson, John McLellan, Charlie Bourgeois, the Newport Jazz Festival, and the Berklee College of Music pop in and out.

But what makes this book rise above the information and stories collected within it is Vacca's skill as researcher, editor, writer, and presenter. The first thing a reader will notice is his lively but not flashy writing style: I'd call it refined, erudite journalism — fast-moving but never superficial. He is a great storyteller, with a fine eye for the telling detail but someone who leaves a reader wanting more rather than feeling as if one was trapped at a party with an Authority on some bit of arcana. (The writer Vacca reminds me of is THE NEW YORKER'S Joseph Mitchell, and that is not a compliment I utter lightly.) He has a light touch, so the book is entertaining without ever seeming thin or didactic. I would hand this book to an aspiring writer, researcher, or reporter, and say, "This is one admirable way to do it."

In addition, the book is obviously the result of diligent research — not simply a synthesis of the available books that touch on the subject, although there is a six-page small-print bibliography (and a discography, a generous touch) but much of the information here comes from contemporary newspapers and magazines and Vacca's interviews with Bostonians who were there, whether they were musicians, fans, or interested onlookers.

I've finished reading it, but it remains on my desk — an irresistible distraction, a book I have been returning to often. It's a remarkable accomplishment — literate, vivid, accurate, and animated.

To find out more about the book, click [here](#). I predict it will provide more pleasure, and more lasting pleasure, than its price — which is roughly that of one compact disc.

May your happiness increase!

To view the original post on the Jazz Lives site, click [here](#), or browse to <http://jazzlives.wordpress.com/2014/02/20/jazz-worth-reading-the-boston-jazz-chronicles-faces-places-and-nightlife-1937-1962>.